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## MEXICAN DIPLOMACY ON THE EVE OF WAR WITH THE UNITED STATES

THE abortive treaty of 1844 for the annexation of Texas to the United States, signed by John C. Calhoun as Secretary of State in President Tyler's Cabinet, was a matter of deep interest to several other powers, and of the most vital interest to Mexico. For eight years successive Mexican administrations had continued to proclaim their undying determination to recover their lost province, although in reality they did nothing; and when rumors of negotiations for annexation became rife, Mexico did not fail to address the most solemn warnings to the United States, to the effect that the ratification of the treaty would be equivalent to a declaration of war.

Great Britain was also interested in the proposed treaty. Ever since Sir Robert Peel's administration came in, his foreign secretary, Lord Aberdeen, had given increasing attention to the fate of Texas. He saw, of course, how futile were the Mexican threats; but he was really and seriously concerned lest the new republic should fall into the hands of the United States, a consummation which, as he had good reason to believe, was probably desired by the people of Texas. On the other hand, it was certain that many of the public men of Texas, moved chiefly by personal ambition, were insistent that she should remain an independent member of the family of nations; while there was a vigorous and outspoken opposition in the United States to the project of annexation.

It seemed therefore quite possible to prevent annexation, and there were many reasons why the British cabinet should wish it prevented. In the first place, the growing power of the United States was regarded with general distrust by European statesmen, and the platform of the Democratic party in 1844 announced a policy of expansion which, if carried out, would immensely increase the national possessions. In the second place, an independent, cotton-growing Texas, especially if established under free-trade auspices, might very well prove an excellent customer for British manufactures. In the third place, British merchants and bondholders needed to see peace and prosperity in Mexico; and the maintenance of an army, under the pretense that it was needed to conquer Texas, was a constant drain on Mexican resources and a principal cause of unceasing revolutions.

And finally it was believed that as annexation to the United States would involve the perpetuation of slavery, so the defeat of annexation might result in abolition, at least in Texas.

British policy, therefore, so far as it concerned itself with Texas at all, sought to build up a strong republic—independent alike of Mexico and the United States. The problem involved three factors. It was necessary to convince the people of Texas that continued independence was better for them than annexation. It was necessary to persuade the Mexican government that the recognition of Texan independence as a *fait accompli* was wise and could be effected without loss of precious dignity. And it was necessary to avoid a rupture with the United States, with which relations were already somewhat strained. Most of the subjects of dispute had been removed by the Webster-Ashburton treaty of 1842, but by 1844 the Oregon question had assumed a threatening aspect; and a little thing might have kindled a war between Great Britain and her best customer.

As time went on, Aberdeen discovered that every move he made in reference to Texas, was likely to excite the jealous susceptibilities of the people of the United States. He had suggested to Mexico that she should recognize the independence of Texas upon condition that the latter abolish slavery, and he had even listened complacently to the suggestion that Great Britain should advance the money necessary to purchase the freedom of the Texan slaves. But protests from the United States and Texas alike, induced Aberdeen to drop this particular project.

What Great Britain needed, in order to give weight to her diplomatic representations, was evidently the support of other European nations and especially of France—for the rest of Europe did not seriously count. Spain, for the moment, was helpless. Italy and Germany were mere geographical expressions, without navies and without national interest in world politics. Austria and Russia were evidently too far off to care.

But with France there were also difficulties. Under the previous government, Lord Palmerston had managed to create a bitter spirit of animosity between the two countries which it was the task of Aberdeen in England and Guizot in France—cordially supported as they were by the two royal families—to remove. As the interests of France were small, Guizot was perfectly willing to gratify Aberdeen by a promise to support British policies in Mexico and Texas; but beyond friendly and peaceable representations France would not go.

It would indeed have been matter for surprise if France at this time had proved willing to embark upon any policy that savored of

adventure. Ever since Guizot came into power in October, 1840, he had been faced by popular demands for electoral and other reforms which he was by no means disposed to grant. He had no belief in universal suffrage. Protestant bourgeois as he proclaimed himself, he profoundly distrusted the people, and he never comprehended the strength or sincerity of their demands. He practised therefore, with the cordial consent of the king, a policy of timid conservatism, of which continued peace and material prosperity were to be the fruits.

Such then were the unsatisfactory materials with which Aberdeen was compelled to work, and he may have wished to delay action till a more favorable time; but the necessity of quickly settling the affairs of Texas, if the alarming growth of the United States was to be checked, became daily more apparent as the time for the presidential election of 1844 approached. The first step must be to get Mexico to yield something of her intransigent attitude, but Mexican vanity stood firmly in the way. Yet it was apparent that Texas was already gone, and that if affairs were not soon adjusted, Mexico ran a very great risk of losing much more of her territory—notably California. California was not defensible against any naval force; so that the only way in which Mexico could possibly hope to secure that part of her possessions in the event of a war with the United States, was by foreign help. But foreign help could not be counted on unless England, or France, or both, would enter into a treaty definitely guaranteeing the integrity of the Mexican possessions. For such a guarantee Mexico must expect to pay; and the price that was asked was her recognition of Texan independence. Mexico hesitated—and opportunity, which had thus knocked at her door, passed on and did not return.

The bargain was definitely proposed by Lord Aberdeen when he first heard of Calhoun's treaty. In an interview near the end of May, 1844, with Señor Tomás Murphy, the Mexican minister in London, Aberdeen said that if Mexico would acknowledge the independence of Texas, England—and very likely France—would oppose annexation to the United States, and that he would endeavor that France and England should jointly guarantee the independence of Texas and the integrity of Mexican territory.<sup>1</sup> At the same time he proposed to the French government "a joint operation on the part of Great Britain and France in order to induce Mexico to acknowledge the independence of Texas, on a guarantee being jointly given by us that that independence shall be respected by other Nations, and that

<sup>1</sup> E. D. Adams, *British Interests and Activities in Texas*, p. 168.

the Mexico-Texian boundary shall be secured from further encroachment".<sup>2</sup> And a few days later, in an interview with Ashbel Smith, the chargé d'affaires of Texas, he proposed a "diplomatic Act" by which England and France, acting with Texas and Mexico, were to secure and guarantee the independence of Texas and settle its boundaries.

So also in the memorandum of "points on the settlement of which the Mexican Government might agree to grant the Independence of Texas", discussed in the following autumn between the British minister in Mexico, and the Mexican government of that day, one of the clauses of the proposed arrangement was that Mexico should receive an indemnity for the loss of Texas, and also,<sup>3</sup>

the guarantee of England and France united, that under no pretext whatever shall the Texans ever pass the Boundaries marked out. The same nations shall also guarantee to Mexico the Californias, New Mexico and the other points of the Northern frontier bordering on the United States, according to a Treaty to be drawn up for that purpose.—If the United States carry into effect the annexation of Texas, to the North American Union, England and France will assist Mexico in the contest which may be thereby brought on.

The idea of any guarantee was, however, soon abandoned, partly because France was lukewarm, partly because of warnings from the British and French ministers in Washington that the least suggestion of foreign interference in the matter of Texas would tend to Clay's defeat in the presidential election of that year, and thus to the immediate annexation of Texas, and partly because the Mexican government persisted in announcing their intention to make war at once. At the end, therefore, of September, 1844, Bankhead, the British minister, had been instructed to say that if Santa Anna, then President of Mexico, "were to take the rash step of invading Texas with a view to its forcible reconquest, and if, by so doing, he should find himself involved in difficulties with other Countries, he must not look for the support of Great Britain in aiding him to extricate himself from those difficulties".<sup>4</sup> But, in spite of this and other later warnings that Mexico would be left to herself if she did not heed the advice of her friends in Europe, the Mexican ministers in London

<sup>2</sup> Aberdeen to Cowley, May 31, in Aberdeen to Bankhead, June 3, 1844. *Ibid.*, p. 171. Smith to Jones, June 24, 1844. Garrison, *Tex. Dip. Corr.* (Am. Hist. Assoc.), III. 1154.

<sup>3</sup> Bankhead to Aberdeen, November 29, 1844. Adams, p. 188.

<sup>4</sup> Aberdeen to Pakenham, September 30, 1844. *Ibid.*, p. 186. The subjects referred to thus far in this article have been very fully discussed in two well-documented works, Professor Adams's book already cited, *British Interests and Activities in Texas*, and Mr. Justin H. Smith's *Annexation of Texas*.

and Paris continued to haggle over territorial guarantees by the European powers as a condition for abandoning her projects for a reconquest of Texas. In repeated interviews they argued that no reliance was to be placed on the good faith of the Texans. If Texan independence were recognized to-day by Mexico, what was to prevent those people from seeking to-morrow annexation to the United States? Would not the mere fact of recognition by Mexico be cited as a proof that Texas was at complete liberty to dispose of her own fortunes? And would a mere treaty of peace and friendship restrain the Texans from new aggressions? Nothing, it was said, would hold the Texans back but the fear of physical force; which force France and Great Britain must agree to furnish if they wished to see peace and to see Texas universally recognized as an independent state.<sup>5</sup>

By the end of November, 1844, the news of Polk's election to the presidency on a platform which favored annexation, had reached Europe, and foreign governments began to see that the United States was fully committed to that policy, and that any attempt by Europe to prevent it might only result in a war for which the people of France, at any rate, had no desire.<sup>6</sup>

It appears to me [wrote Maximo Garro, the Mexican minister in Paris] that the Cabinet of the Tuilleries, even though it might wish to join with that of London in taking up arms in opposition to the annexation of Texas, could never do so without exciting a general clamor against any such policy. All parties, without exception, would accuse it of forgetting that the interests of France require that it shall not take part in a struggle which, whatever its result, will weaken two of her maritime rivals and consequently contribute to the growth of her own power. . . .

Should there be a rupture between the English and the Americans, we ought to be able to count on an alliance with the former; but if the latter should take up arms to oppose our projected expedition for the reconquest of Texas, I believe that Great Britain will only present itself as a *pacific mediator*, and that it would redouble its efforts to have Mexico recognize the independence of that Department, offering in that event to intervene in a more efficacious manner.

William R. King, the American minister in Paris, held similar opinions.<sup>7</sup>

There should be no wavering [he wrote privately to the Secretary

<sup>5</sup> Murphy to Minister of Relations, January 1, June 1, and July 1, 1845; Garro to same, March 25, June 17, 1845. MSS. Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (Mexico).

<sup>6</sup> Garro to Minister of Relations, December 18, 1844. *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> King to Calhoun, December 28, 1844. *Report of the Amer. Hist. Assoc.*, 1899, II. 1014.

of State] on the subject of the annexation of Texas. The growling of the British Lion should only stimulate to immediate action. To falter in our course from apprehension of her hostility, would disgrace us in the eyes of all Europe. The act accomplished, England will complain, perhaps threaten, and her newspapers will be lavish in their abuse; but that will be all; for with all her power, she can but feel, that a war with us would be more prejudicial to her interest, than with any other nation. She will not risk the consequences. I am aware that she is exerting herself to induce France to make common cause with her on the subject of Texas, and that Mr. Guizot is much inclined to do so; but it will not succeed. It would shock the French nation, which detests all alliances with England; and the King is too wise, and too prudent to place himself in a position which would go far towards destroying his dynasty.

In fact, although neither Señor Garro nor Mr. King was aware of it, the French government had already politely declined to make common cause with Great Britain. Lord Cowley, the British ambassador, early in December, 1844, reported that he had asked the direct question whether France would "act in concert with us in any negotiation with the Mexican Govt. for the purpose of obtaining from them the acknowledgment of" Texan independence. "Any negotiation" probably seemed to Guizot a dangerously vague phrase, and he therefore explained just how far France would go.<sup>8</sup>

Undoubtedly [he said to Cowley] we will both use our best efforts for that purpose, and will even refuse to recognize the annexation of Texas to the United States; but, as a Question of Peace or War, I am not prepared to say that its junction with the American States is of sufficient importance to us to justify our having recourse to arms in order to prevent it.

Aberdeen however was very unwilling to abandon his project of a joint guarantee by Great Britain and France, which he still hoped would result in preserving the existence of Texas as an independent nation. But to attain that end it was evidently essential to gain the assent of Mexico; and Aberdeen thought it necessary to use plain language in warning the Mexican authorities of the dangerous consequences of the course they seemed bent on pursuing. To the British minister in Mexico he wrote:<sup>9</sup>

You will also again clearly explain to the Mexican Govt. that they must not count upon the assistance of Gt. Britain, whose friendly advice they have constantly neglected in enabling them to resist any attack which may at any time, now or hereafter, be made upon Mexico by the U. States, since they will have wilfully exposed themselves to such attacks by omitting to make a friend and dependent of Texas while it was yet time.

<sup>8</sup> Cowley to Aberdeen, December 2, 1844. Adams, pp. 190-191.

<sup>9</sup> Aberdeen to Bankhead, December 31, 1844. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

To Tomás Murphy, the Mexican minister in London, similar language was used, but the door of hope was held open. In a conversation at the Foreign Office, Aberdeen denounced the folly of an attempt to reconquer Texas.<sup>10</sup>

What had Mexico to hope from such an undertaking? Not only would she never recover that territory, but in the course of the war with the United States in which she would be involved she would probably lose other provinces and especially the Californias. These and no others would be the results, truly disastrous for Mexico, if she persisted in so imprudent a policy. How different would the conditions be if she would listen to the voice of reason and decide once for all to recognize the independence of Texas! . . . In that event, as he had told me several times, it might be possible, with the co-operation of France, to enter into arrangements for guaranteeing at the proper time the independence of Texas and the territory of Mexico. The recognition of the independence of that country is therefore the only course which reason, prudence and sane policy commend to Mexico,—following the example of other countries in the like circumstances. It was well for England that she recognized the independence of her former colonies when she saw it was hopeless to reconquer them; and it was well for Spain that she did the same in respect to hers. "Now", continued Lord Aberdeen, "if Mexico persists in her desperate projects, it may not be impossible that England and France will resolve to oppose both annexation to the United States and reconquest by Mexico. . . . I have spoken of the Californias. You may be aware that offers of that country have been made to England by the Mexican inhabitants themselves; as also proposals for establishing colonies there under our protection. Acting in this matter in the honorable spirit in which I hope we always act, we have closed our ears to these proposals and offers." But must we let our fair dealing serve only to enable some one else to take possession of that territory? The attack of Commodore Jones in time of peace shows you what you must expect from the preposterous war (*la insensata guerra*) with the United States in which you wish to engage."

Aberdeen's rather vague suggestions naturally did not suffice for the Mexican minister and he asked what guarantees might be counted on. Aberdeen replied that England alone would not engage in war with the United States, though he would not say so to them.<sup>12</sup>

I asked His Lordship what was the disposition of France. He replied that when M. Guizot was here<sup>13</sup> he talked with him at length about the business, and although in general he agreed to co-operate with England on the question of guarantees, it must be confessed he would not go to the length of binding himself to make war.

<sup>10</sup> Murphy to Minister of Relations, January 1, 1845. MSS. Sec. Rel. Ext.

<sup>11</sup> The reference is to a request for a protectorate made through Forbes, the British vice-consul at Monterey, by the inhabitants of California some months before.

<sup>12</sup> Murphy to Minister of Relations, January 1, 1845. MSS. Sec. Rel. Ext.

<sup>13</sup> Guizot accompanied Louis Philippe on a state visit to Queen Victoria in the latter part of September, 1844.



Thus matters stood during the winter, but late in March, 1845, after the news of the passage of the annexation resolutions by Congress had reached Europe, accompanied by the inaugural address of the new President, the Mexican minister in Paris had an interview with the king which he reported in the following dramatic form to his government:<sup>14</sup>

"*Eh bien*, M. Garro, is your new administration going to recognize the independence of Texas so as to stop annexation to the United States? It cannot be prevented in any other way."

"I don't know of anything, Sir, *up to the present time*, which leads me to suppose that the present Government is any more disposed than the former one to abandon the defence of our just rights over that territory."

"Why, what hope have you of reconquering it? The Americans will never allow it, and a war with them would lead to consequences infinitely serious and disastrous for Mexico, for she would run the risk of losing a great part of her present possessions."

After some further talk of the advantages to Mexico of recognizing Texas, which, Garro said, would be illusory unless France and England guaranteed the stipulations of any treaty that might be made, the king spoke of the difficulty of conquering Texas without a navy capable of dealing with the American navy, and of the foolish obstinacy Spain had displayed in refusing to recognize the independence of her former colonies. The king continued:

"To describe the kind of obstinacy which prevents seeing what is evident, we have a word in French which is very easy to translate into Spanish,—*infatuation*. This *infatuation* prevents you from recognizing what everybody else sees; that is, that you have lost Texas irrevocably. If I urge you to recognize her independence, it is because I believe that advantages will result to Mexico, in whose happiness I take great interest. If a barrier is once established between Mexico and the United States, they will have no excuse for mixing in your affairs, and they will let you live in peace."

"Sir, I beg your Majesty to let me ask one question, and allow me to send your answer to my Government, so that they may know what they can in any event rely on. If Mexico should decide to recognize the independence of Texas, would your Majesty's Government and that of Great Britain *guarantee formally* the perpetuity of the boundaries of the new State?"

"No, no. Any such formal guarantee might give rise to an intervention, and I don't like interventions; because I know what they cost in blood and treasure. Without this formal guarantee, the arrangements you may make would afford you the necessary security."

<sup>14</sup> Garro to the Minister of Relations, March 25, 1845. MSS. Sec. Rel. Ext. The italics appear in the original.

"Sir, I beg your Majesty to believe that my question was only for the purpose of informing my Government what it could hope for in the *hypothesis* which I have no grounds for foreseeing—"

The King walked away, repeating that he was very sincerely interested in the happiness of the Republic.

Before closing this despatch I must tell your Excellency that before the King came up to speak to me he had been talking for some time with the English Ambassador who, when His Majesty left him, came up to me and asked me what I thought about Texan affairs. I told him frankly my opinion and my astonishment at the recognition,—under Lord Palmerston's *Whig* Administration (the Ambassador Lord Cowley is of the *Tory* party) which wished to abolish negro slavery,—of a State that had established slavery where it did not exist before. Lord Cowley, pretending not to understand my observation, said: "But really now, how does the Mexican Government expect to conquer Texas?" (Your Excellency will note that this was almost exactly the same question with which the King began his conversation.) "By employing all her resources," I replied, "to accomplish it." "Yes, but with these resources you have not been able to do much so far, and I am afraid that, in view of all the circumstances, you will not be more fortunate in future."

I confess that I could not find any entirely satisfactory answer to this simple remark.

A few days after this interview, all idea of giving Mexico any guarantees against the possible encroachments of the United States, was definitely abandoned, as the French government firmly refused to join in the project. Lord Aberdeen, however, was not yet willing to give up his hopes of continuing Texas as an independent state. He therefore proposed that Great Britain and France should unite in trying once more to secure an acknowledgment of Texan independence from Mexico, but upon the distinct understanding that there should be no responsibility on the part of either of the European powers. Both governments on several occasions had been told positively that Mexico would not recognize Texas without a guarantee of her good behavior, but Aberdeen doubtless thought it worth while, under the hopeless circumstances of Mexico, to make one more attempt.<sup>15</sup>

H. M's Govt. [he wrote] would not propose to enter into any guarantee whatever with respect to either of the States, whether to secure to Mexico the inviolability of Her frontier against Texas, or to secure to Texas its frontier against the United States or Mexico. In fact H. M's Govt. would not be disposed to place themselves in any respect in a position which might give to Mexico or to Texas the power of hereafter calling upon Great Britain, as a matter of right, for her protection and succour against encroachment on the part of any other Powers, nor even of leading the Mexican Govt. to hope that such succour might be afforded. . . . They would merely wish to exert all

<sup>15</sup> Aberdeen to Cowley, April 15, 1845. Adams, pp. 204-205.

the weight of their moral influence, added to that of France, in order to secure the present pacification and future stability both of Mexico and Texas.

Guizot of course agreed to this proposal, which was exactly in line with what his government desired and had offered; and on the first day of May instructions were sent to Bankhead directing him to urge upon the Mexican government the importance of haste in seizing this last chance of safety.<sup>16</sup>

By the same packet that carried Aberdeen's instructions, the Mexican minister in London wrote to notify his government of the change in the attitude of Peel's administration, which he thought was not surprising, as they had always declared they would not act alone and France had undoubtedly refused to co-operate in the plan of an absolute guarantee.<sup>17</sup>

These letters were crossed on the Atlantic by "most secret" circular instructions from the Mexican government to its diplomatic agents in England, France, and Spain, advising them of the propositions just submitted by Texas to the effect that she would agree not to annex herself to the United States if Mexico would recognize her independence.<sup>18</sup> The President of Mexico, the circular stated,

is disposed to enter into a treaty with Texas suitable to the honor and dignity of Mexico, thus avoiding all the evils and complications of a war, while he hopes to be able to succeed in preventing the annexation of that Department to the United States, and in the meantime has succeeded in delaying it for the present. . . . Your Excellency will endeavor to ascertain the spirit of the Government to which you are accredited and ascertain the terms upon which a treaty might be made with England, France and Spain . . . which will assure to Mexico the inviolability of the territory she now possesses.

Spain, of course, was hopelessly incapable of entering into any engagement of the kind suggested.<sup>19</sup>

This unhappy nation [Gorostiza, formerly minister in the United States, and now Mexican minister in Madrid, had written some weeks earlier], torn for so many years past by civil war, is at present in too precarious a position, too weak and without resources . . . to note and weigh the serious events which are taking place on the Continent of America. Thus it is that although the question of the annexation of Texas to the United States has attracted the attention of Her Majesty's Government on account of its importance and on account of the am-

<sup>16</sup> Aberdeen to Bankhead, May 1, 1845. Adams, p. 205.

<sup>17</sup> Murphy to Minister of Relations, May 1, 1845. MSS. Sec. Rel. Ext.

<sup>18</sup> Cuevas to Garro, *muy reservado*, April 29, 1845. *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Gorostiza to Minister of Relations, February 20, 1845. *Ibid.*

bitious tendencies which the dishonorable (*desleal*) conduct of the Washington Cabinet towards Mexico discloses, it is not to be expected that it will deal with the matter with the energy that could be desired, and still less that it will be disposed to take up arms to prevent the usurpation which is projected by our Anglo-American neighbors.

France, for different reasons, was equally unwilling to become involved in war. In reply to a verbal request to Guizot for a definite answer, he was reported to have replied as follows:<sup>20</sup>

Neither the King's Government nor that of Great Britain (to whom this question is of more interest) can *ever* give such a guarantee as will, in certain events, compel them to intervene with force of arms. No: *such a guarantee is impossible*, and you can readily understand the reasons that forbid it, when you consider present circumstances and the difficulties inherent in the parliamentary system etc., etc.; but the Mexican Government may count upon the *moral influence* of France and England,—upon their good offices, their friendly counsels, their energetic remonstrances to prevent the Texans from violating treaties.

Great Britain perhaps might have been willing to take a much bolder stand if she could have felt sure of France; but without France at her side, the British government had always refused to act. The Mexican agents abroad believed that the secret of this refusal was the very slight reliance that could be placed by England on French support. They reported that most Frenchmen, so far as they thought about the business at all, were rather pleased than otherwise at the idea of Texas being annexed to the United States—simply because it was displeasing to England. What the immense majority of Frenchmen wanted, was to see England humiliated. Louis Philippe and his cabinet—though perhaps some of them in the bottom of their hearts had not forgotten Waterloo—did what was possible to bring about the *entente cordiale*, of which the king talked so much. Such an informal understanding was entirely in line with their general policy; but if the country was not behind them, there was a point beyond which the French government would not have dared to go in support of Great Britain.

The British government, it was said, were perfectly aware of this attitude on the part of the French people; and they were afraid that in the event of war with the United States France might not only fail to make common cause with Great Britain, but might even seek revenge, as in 1778, by again making an American alliance.

It is therefore not surprising [wrote Murphy] that the English Minister looks with terror upon anything that may expose him to a war

<sup>20</sup> Garro to same, June 23, 1845. MSS. Sec. Rel. Ext. The italics appear in the original.

with the United States, unless he first comes to a complete understanding with France; not because he needs her physical force in a conflict with the United States, but because he must commit her in such a manner that she will not join with the enemy's forces and so bring on a general conflagration throughout the world, which would involve incalculable consequences.

And Murphy, in his next dispatch, expressed the opinion that if Aberdeen could have carried France along with him, war with the United States would not have stood in his way; but that, as this was impossible, he was greatly embarrassed.<sup>21</sup>

When, therefore, the news reached the Foreign Office that the Texan proposals to abandon annexation to the United States on condition of being recognized as independent, had been favorably received by Mexico, while news came at the same time of the unanimous expressions of popular feeling in Texas against these proposals, Aberdeen saw his whole policy in ruins. He had wished to build up a buffer state and to limit the growth of the United States, but his instruments had all failed him. France, whom he may have suspected of treachery, would not take a firm stand; the people of Texas plainly did not wish her to be a buffer state; and Mexico was never ready to take any step at the time when the British government wished it to move. He was therefore very much disposed to blame the Mexicans. "You always do everything too late", he told Murphy; and he showed him newspaper reports of the public meetings in Texas in favor of annexation. It was too late, he said, to think of a joint guarantee; there was no hope that France would agree to it; and England, as he had always told Murphy, would not act alone.<sup>22</sup>

But Lord Aberdeen's determination not to interfere was sorely tried when he began to see with increasing clearness that one inevitable result of war between Mexico and the United States must be the annexation of California to the Union. All he could do, however, was to advise delay. A declaration of war, he told the Mexicans, would immediately be followed by American occupation of California, the bombardment of Vera Cruz, and the blockade of all ports; and neither England nor France could interfere, if the annexation of Texas had once become a *fait accompli*.<sup>23</sup>

It follows [wrote Murphy] that England and therefore France, will submit in patience to the annexation of Texas and the defeat of the plan

<sup>21</sup> "Nada le importaría esa guerra si pudiese arrastrar tras si á la Francia, pero no siendo esto posible, la cuestion por cierto toma un carácter bien embarazoso para su señoría." Murphy to Minister of Relations, November 1, 1845; October 1, 1845. And to the same effect, Garro to same, May 30, 1845. MSS. Sec. Rel. Ext.

<sup>22</sup> Murphy to Minister of Relations, July 1, 1845. *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Same to same, August 1, 1845. *Ibid.*

of intervening to prevent it. Still, I think I can assure your Excellency that although Lord Aberdeen is afraid the Californias may fall into the power of the Americans, and advises Mexico to refrain from declaring war, and watches in a passive attitude the course of events, he would at heart rejoice if war should take place and our country should prove successful.

But notwithstanding all the discouraging reports which the Mexican government received from Europe, it resolved, as soon as it was definitely informed that the Texas convention had voted to accept the American proposals, to make one more appeal for aid to the European powers.

In despatches to the Mexican ministers in France and England, the Minister of Foreign Relations declared that in view of the consummation of the act of usurpation of the Department of Texas by the United States, no recourse was left but that of war with the United States. As that nation had observed a dishonorable and perfidious conduct toward Mexico and had no other object than to possess itself of as much as possible of Mexican territory, the republic would be unworthy of a place among civilized nations were it not resolved to prosecute the war with vigor. A body of fourteen thousand men was on the march for the frontier, and six thousand more would shortly follow them. The government of the republic had sought to adopt the advice of France and England in the matter of Texas, and it flattered itself therefore that these governments would now show themselves favorable to the cause of the Mexican nation, which, it was hoped, would have their sympathy and moral support.<sup>24</sup>

To London, in addition, was sent another and "most secret" instruction. The Americans, it was said, had officially announced their intention of taking the Californias.<sup>25</sup>

It is therefore indispensable that your Excellency shall, in the manner you may deem most opportune and respectful, give H. M. Government to understand that Mexico will receive their cooperation to prevent the loss of that important part of her territory, as a proof of the good relations that exist between the two Countries. As it is not possible to tell what policy may have been adopted by the British Cabinet on learning of the annexation of Texas to the United States, it is not possible to indicate the steps which your Excellency should take.

A copy of the first of these important documents was sent to Lord Aberdeen, and Murphy waited a few days before calling on

<sup>24</sup> Cuevas to Garro, July 30, 1845, *reservado*. MSS. Sec. Rel. Ext. Also duplicate to Murphy of same date.

<sup>25</sup> Cuevas to Murphy, July 30, 1845, *muy reservado*. *Ibid*.

him, so that it might be translated in the Foreign Office. When he called, Aberdeen said that he saw from this paper that the Mexican government considered war inevitable and that they asked for the sympathy and moral support of the British government in the struggle; but he did not see clearly what practical application that request could have. Murphy said he had something to propose. It was evident that the ambitious views of the United States were not limited to the violent and infamous robbery of Texas; California was also the object of their avarice, and it was certain that as soon as war was formally declared it would be the target for their attacks. Mexico would not neglect so important a point, and would defend it by all the means in her power, in spite of the difficulties due to the distance of that part of the republic from the seat of government. But to defend California effectually naval forces were essential, and Mexico had none, so that the help of some friendly naval power was needed. This he was instructed to ask of Great Britain.

Aberdeen said this would be taking part in the war between Mexico and the United States, which Murphy could not but admit. He thought, however, if the British government objected to war, some other plan might be adopted, "some combination which would give England the right to repel, even by force, the attack which the Americans would not fail to make on California,—without thereby losing the neutral character she wishes to preserve".

Aberdeen rose to the bait at once. There had been, he said, a plan of colonization made up by the English consul in the City of Mexico, Mr. Mackintosh, a partner of the firm of Manning and Marshall of London, which Mr. Bankhead had forwarded with a view to finding out how far the British government would favor it; and he sent for Bankhead's despatch and read it to Murphy.<sup>26</sup> Murphy, who had known nothing of Mackintosh's proposal, was quick to see the point.<sup>27</sup>

"Well, my Lord", I said, "if the Mexican Government agrees to that, your Lordship can see that you have there an opportunity under which England might put itself forward as protecting British interests, and might consequently oppose an attack on California by the United States, without thereby taking any part in the war."

But Aberdeen saw difficulties in the way. He remarked that if the grant to British subjects had been made some time before, the

<sup>26</sup> This was Bankhead's despatch of July 30, 1845, to which no reply was given (in writing) either to Bankhead or to the promoters. Adams, p. 253. It seems probable however that Lord Aberdeen may have talked to members of the firm in London.

<sup>27</sup> Murphy to Minister of Relations, October 1, 1845. MSS. Sec. Rel. Ext.

matter would be simpler; but if made just at this time, it would be regarded as made in view of present circumstances and would give just cause of complaint to the United States. If war with America was to be the result, the subject would have to be looked at for a long time, even if Mexico offered California to England as a gift, for England would not go to war alone. Now if France would join, it would be very different. Murphy asked what was to be done to accomplish the object. Aberdeen remained silent for some time, and finally promised to sound Guizot.

At an interview a few days later, reported in the same despatch, Aberdeen said he had sent a message to Guizot, but had received no answer. The policy of France generally, he considered, was to keep in accord with the United States. He wished Mexico would present some definite proposal showing how England could co-operate. Any project of colonization or sale made at this time would justly offend the United States. He would consider what could be done; the matter was very serious and needed reflection; it was necessary to watch the course of events, and in the meantime Mexico ought not to rush hastily into war.

Murphy left him firmly convinced that the British government would frankly and openly take part in the war so as to prevent the United States from absorbing the Californias, if only it were not held back by France; but as to the helpful attitude of France, he had the gravest doubts.

As time went on, Aberdeen expressed himself more and more positively as being unwilling to intervene in any way between Mexico and the United States. Murphy quoted him as saying that he did not doubt the justice of the Mexican cause; but that it would be quixotic for England and France to act upon that ground alone. As for the interest they had in seeing that California did not fall into the hands of the United States, this was hardly enough to run the risk of a war with its incalculable consequences. No doubt they could never look with indifference upon that fine country in American hands, but there was a great distinction between that and willingness to risk a disastrous war.

However, a hint from Lord Aberdeen that something might yet be done by taking advantage of a Mexican decree of April 12, 1837, under which the holders of bonds were authorized to locate land in various parts of Mexico, including California, set Murphy to work on another plan. He learned that a Mr. Powles, vice-chairman of the Mexican Bondholders Committee, and Mr. Price, a member of the firm of Manning and Marshall, had seen Aberdeen and that he



had expressed an active interest in the subject. Accordingly, with the aid of these two gentlemen, a plan was drawn up as follows: a company was to be formed to acquire from the Mexican government 50,000,000 acres of land in California. This land was to be paid for as follows:

In deferred Mexican bonds .....	£5,000,000
In cash .....	1,250,000
	<u>£6,250,000</u>

The cash was to be payable to Mexico in installments, and was to be borrowed by the company at three per cent. interest, the British government guaranteeing the loan.

How the British government was to be persuaded to guarantee such a loan, did not appear; nor did Murphy very clearly see how Great Britain could intervene to prevent the sovereignty over California passing from Mexico to the United States, provided the interests of British subjects were not thereby put in peril. However, the only question with Lord Aberdeen was to find some way of thwarting American expansion, without at the same time risking a war. He even ventured the impossible suggestion that California might set up an independent government, which could be recognized by Mexico and its independence guaranteed by France and England.<sup>28</sup>

Lord Aberdeen [wrote Murphy] has been reduced to inventing various plans which on the one hand may prevent the dreaded seizure of California by the Americans, and on the other, may not involve England in serious controversies with them. It is not easy to find such a combination, but I believe I am not mistaken in saying that he thinks of nothing else.

But Murphy, of course, did not know that the subject of intervention to save California from the encroaching Americans had been the subject of discussions in the cabinet which had ended in the decision to do nothing, so long as the Oregon question remained open. There was strong pressure brought to bear from many different sources, there were vague tales in the newspapers of British efforts to acquire "the magnificent province of California", and it was urged that the prospect of a war between Mexico and the United States offered an assured means of converting dreams into realities and of securing, by a grant from Mexico, an interest in that great and undeveloped land.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Murphy to Minister of Relations, November 1, 1845. MSS. Sec. Rel. Ext.

<sup>29</sup> A French newspaper, early in March, 1845, stated that it appeared from Santa Anna's correspondence (then recently seized) that he had been on the eve

Lord Aberdeen's son, writing of the cabinet discussion, and the proposal to establish a British colony in California, says:<sup>30</sup>

Nor was Sir Robert Peel wholly undazzled by the prospect. Lord Aberdeen, however, maintained that although, had the interest already existed, it would be right to maintain it, its establishment at such a moment, and in such a manner, would be little less hostile than a declaration by England and France that they would not permit the conquest of California, which would virtually be a declaration of war against the United States. But even this he would prefer to the creation of an unreal interest for political purposes. The grant might create a very pretty quarrel, but no amount of privileges bestowed by Mexico would suffice to keep out American settlers, who would probably be too powerful for the English. But, above all, while the Oregon question was still capable of a peaceful settlement, he deprecated a measure which would practically render such a settlement impossible. Should the negotiation respecting it end in war, the offers of Mexico should be at once accepted, and the active co-operation of Mexican forces on the south-west frontier of the United States encouraged as a formidable diversion of the American forces.

This then was the final decision of the British government, and it involved some embarrassment to their agents in America, and especially to Sir George Seymour, the admiral in command of the naval squadron on the Pacific coast. He was left wholly without instructions in reference to California, and all he knew of the policy of his government was derived from the copy of Lord Aberdeen's instructions of December 31, 1844, which, late in the year 1845, Bankhead sent him from Mexico.

From these instructions the admiral gathered that while the separation of California from Mexico was regarded as probably inevitable, it was for the Mexican government alone to take measures for providing against such a contingency; that Great Britain had no ground for interfering to preserve California to Mexico, just as it had no right to excite or encourage the inhabitants to separate from Mexico; and that if Mexico chose to be wilfully blind, it could not be helped. A policy of complete non-interference thus seemed to be prescribed, although the British minister had been enjoined to keep his attention "vigilantly alive" to every credible report of occurrences in California, and especially with respect to

of ceding California to perfidious Albion for the sum of \$25,000,000, "of which he had reserved for himself a considerable portion". This was copied a day or two later in the English press, and a question was asked in the House of Commons concerning it. Sir Robert Peel for the government of the day and Lord Palmerston for the former government, declared the story to be "as utterly without foundation as any report that was ever invented". Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, LXXVIII. 431 (March 7, 1845).

<sup>30</sup> Gordon, *Aberdeen*, pp. 183-184.

the proceedings of American citizens settled in that province, who, it was thought, were "likely to play a prominent part in any proceeding which may take place there, having for its object to free the Province from the yoke of Mexico".<sup>31</sup>

In the spring of 1846, Admiral Seymour, still without any later instructions, was rendered anxious by the increase of the United States naval forces in the Pacific, and he wrote urging that reinforcements be sent him. Again in the month of June he wrote that he had not deemed it advisable to proceed to California "under the views expressed by the Earl of Aberdeen to Her Majesty's Minister in Mexico, deprecating interference, while California formed a part of the Mexican Republic".<sup>32</sup> This, of course, is proof positive that no instructions in reference to California of a date later than December 31, 1844, had reached him; much as he must have desired to learn what was expected of the ships under his command.

The British policy of waiting to see what would happen in the Oregon business before deciding what to do about California, involved also the necessity, or at least the desirability, of preventing Mexico from beginning hostilities prematurely. The news, therefore, that the American government had offered to resume diplomatic relations and to send a minister to Mexico, fitted in exactly with Aberdeen's plans. He hoped that everything might be gained by negotiation, especially time; and he was careful to warn the Mexicans to go slowly. Murphy, the Mexican minister, having referred in conversation to the Oregon dispute:<sup>33</sup>

Lord Aberdeen replied that England would do everything compatible with her honor and her interest to avoid a conflict, and that he believed and hoped that the United States, after all, would not disturb the peace between the two countries; that at any rate there would be a whole year in which to negotiate on the subject; that within the year either the United States would submit it to the arbitration of some third power, or they would agree on some honorable and convenient division of the disputed territory; and that if neither of these things were done (though he was sure they would be) then God knew what would happen. His Lordship continued, "So far as concerns your negotiation with the United States, *as it is always your custom to go slow, you might now do so from policy.*"<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Aberdeen to Bankhead, December 31, 1844. Adams, pp. 249-250.

<sup>32</sup> Seymour to Corry, June 13, 1846. *Ibid.*, p. 258. See also letter from Lord Alcester, *Century Magazine*, XL. 794.

<sup>33</sup> Murphy to Minister of Relations, January 1, 1846. MSS. Sec. Rel. Ext.

<sup>34</sup> Italics in the original. "Ya que siempre andan Vmds. despacio por habito, ahora pueden hacerlo por cálculo."

Nothing more was said about grants of land in California or projects of colonization. These were tacitly dropped, and nothing was heard from them again. The European governments waited for news from America.

Toward the end of January, 1846, Murphy received instructions from his government written just before the arrival of the American minister (John Slidell) at Vera Cruz. Nothing, he was told, had yet been heard from the United States as to the arrival of "a commissioner to settle the pending questions", but the American ships of war had been withdrawn from before Vera Cruz. There were rumors that General Taylor was advancing from Corpus Christi, Texas, where he had been encamped since the summer, but this was supposed to be due to the fact that he had not yet been informed of the arrangement to receive the American commissioner. Nothing had been omitted, so far as the scanty resources of the treasury would permit, to provide for the defense and security of the Department of the Californias. A military expedition was preparing, part of which was already at Acapulco, and would proceed to its destination as soon as possible; "but as perchance it may not be sufficient to ward off a *coup de main* by the Americans, in case hostilities should be begun, it is indispensable to rely on the assistance which the Government hopes to obtain from Great Britain and France".<sup>35</sup>

There was really nothing new in all this, but Murphy duly called at the Foreign Office, and then wrote that he had nothing to add to the information he had previously given. The Foreign Secretary still strongly objected to the Americans taking California, and would be glad to employ the power of Great Britain to prevent it; but he would not dare to take such a step, as he feared a war with the United States. But, added Murphy, "this consideration would not stop him, if he could count on the co-operation of France"; and although France had not openly changed her policy, yet Guizot's recent speeches, in which he deplored the spirit of aggression that prevailed in the United States, furnished some ground for hope that such a change had been decided on.

The situation, so far as the Mexican representatives in Europe could see it, was thus summed up:<sup>36</sup>

Our position under present circumstances appears to me to be as follows: England will do nothing, either directly or indirectly, to forestall the usurpation of California so long as the Oregon question

<sup>35</sup> Peña y Peña to Murphy, November 28, 1845. MSS. Sec. Rel. Ext. The expedition from Acapulco never got away from that port.

<sup>36</sup> Murphy to Minister of Relations, February 1, 1846. *Ibid.*

remains unsettled. If war breaks out, all difficulty on the part of this Cabinet will have ceased, and there is no doubt that one of their first objects will be, in that event, to prevent that usurpation. If on the contrary the dispute over Oregon is amicably settled, England will find herself more free to act in respect to California,—openly and directly in case France continues in the line of policy she has just adopted and lends her aid,—or indirectly by means of some plan of Colonization in California.

Every hope therefore of foreign aid depended on the result of the negotiations concerning the Oregon question; and when that question was settled a few weeks later, Mexico was left by her European friends to the fate which they had so clearly foretold.

GEORGE L. RIVES.